

‘Exekias made me’: the master of black-figure pottery

Katerina Volioti

Considered one of the finest and most innovative of the black-figure masters, Exekias’ vases are often admired for the precision and beauty of their paintings. Yet Exekias was not just an artist; as Katerina Volioti explains, he was a potter of extraordinary technical skill.

A potter and painter

Exekias was an Athens-based maker and painter of black-figured vases who was probably active from 545 to 530 B.C.; that is, during the Archaic period when the tyrant Peisistratus ruled Athens. He has often been greatly admired, for example by John Beazley (1885–1970), the most meticulous classifier of vases in the twentieth century – and with good reason. Exekias’ surviving pottery amounts to some thirty vases, mostly amphorae, and two funerary plaques. And yet, small as this corpus might seem to us, it is more than enough to show that he was an extraordinary artist. He rendered the figures on his ceramics – human forms, animals, plants, and material entities – with exquisite precision, confidence, and expressiveness. When we admire Exekias’ work today, we tend to focus on the images and scenes represented. Yet, as we know from the signatures Exekias left behind, he was equally, if not more, proud of the fact he had *made* the pots he decorated.

How to make a black-figured pot

There were several stages in the production of a black-figure pot. First, the potter needed to be a technical expert in preparing the clay; then, he needed to throw and assemble the various parts of the pot. In black figure, a painter drew his figures in black, so that they stood out against the pink-red background of the pot’s clay. Red figure, by contrast, is the photonegative of black figure: the background is filled with black glaze and the figures have the clay’s colour. To indicate details, painters of black figure applied extra colours. But, unlike modern paints that consist of che-

micals and solvents, the black glaze and added colours were clay slips: that is, clay diluted with water. When pots were hard fired, at temperatures of about 900 °C, the different slips turned black, white, and purple-red.

Yet this final product was only accomplished after a complex kiln-firing process which involved three stages: oxidation, reduction, and re-oxidation. In the first stage (‘oxidation’), air was allowed into the kiln, where the iron in the pot’s body and clay slips reacted with the oxygen to turn all surfaces red. Then, in the ‘reducing phase’, the air supply was stopped, causing the iron oxides of the clay slips to become black, until finally, air was introduced again (‘re-oxidation’), so that the coarser surfaces of the pot regained their red colour, while the fine clay of the slip remained black, impermeable, and glossy. As a final touch, Exekias cut away some of the black paint with sharp instruments to expose the natural character of the terracotta: these incisions enabled Exekias to create the intricate details for which he is renowned.

The Dionysus cup

One of Exekias’ most famous pots is his only (surviving) drinking cup, a kylix from about 535 B.C. known as the ‘Dionysus cup’. The manifest purpose of a kylix (plural kylikes) was to hold wine mixed with water at the symposium, but this cup was more than a vessel to drink from: it was an object of status, a spectacle to admire and the centre-piece of the party. The rich imagery of the interior shows Dionysus sailing on the ocean, reclining in a warship, from the mast of which grow vines and grape clusters. Dolphins leap all about him, engulfing the

ship and even floating in mid-air. The scene depicts a mythological event, when Dionysus encountered pirates who were subsequently transformed into dolphins; it is also likely that it alludes to contemporary Athenian festivals, which involved a procession of Dionysus’ image in a ship cart. The god himself is celebrated as the lord of plenty, hence the drinking cup in his hand: he is the bringer of food, wealth, and luxury goods.

We can see in these images the details and precision mentioned above. Yet there is more: the cup itself was huge, innovative in terms of its shape, and unique with regards to the technique Exekias used. With this cup, Exekias may have aimed to show off his technical brilliance, how he mastered materials and techniques to produce great art. To appreciate these skills, let us chart Exekias’ efforts in throwing together and decorating this kylix.

Preparing the clay

Exekias must have sourced his clays from the countryside of Attica carefully: in fact, recent scientific research has shown that only certain clay beds could provide the right kind of clays – that is, clays of a suitable composition – to produce an excellent quality black glaze upon firing. As on Exekias’ kylix, this glaze has a distinctive blue-black appearance which reflects the light perfectly, in a manner not unlike that of modern glass. It is likely, then, that Exekias used different clays for different purposes: one type for the pot itself, and another for the clay slips on the surface. Either way, he knew his material and how to work it. A potter needed to prepare his clays patiently, suspending them in water to remove impurities. Then, he had to knead the clay to remove air bubbles; this process was of importance because air bubbles could cause cracks when throwing and firing the pot. One mistake and his efforts would have been ruined.

Assembling the parts

To make this kylix, Exekias threw and assembled its different parts, working like an architect and builder. We can only really appreciate how much skill was required when we stop to think how large this cup is. The deep hemispherical bowl measures 30.4 cm in diameter and it can hold 3.3 litres when full to the rim. The bowl rests on a short stem with a wide foot, which Exekias shaped separately before attaching it to the bowl. Appending the handles was particularly risky: as the pot dried, cracks could easily form where the handles joined the bowl, or the handles might just come off altogether. Firing – the riskiest stage in any pot's preparation – must have been in Exekias' mind all the time, yet the finished cup testifies to his perfectionism. It is balanced, robust, and functional; more remarkable still, with this cup Exekias introduced a new kylix shape. Whereas earlier kylikes had been small with a high stem, the Dionysus cup proudly shows off a deep, rounded, and lipless bowl, with a short stem, and a ring of clay at the bowl/stem junction. We know that the new shape was an immediate hit because other artisans copied it.

The finishing touches

When it came to applying the finishing touches, being a potter, Exekias appreciated the cup's three-dimensionality: he knew which areas, or rather spaces, his pot offered for figural decoration. It was here, too, that Exekias saw an opportunity to innovate. Drawing on the curved surfaces of the bowl represented something of a challenge; earlier cups of this sort tend only to be decorated on the tondo of the interior. Yet Exekias filled the entire space of the interior in a way no other painter had ever done. He painted Dionysus and the warship, the vines, grape clusters, and dolphins we have already seen – all with a clay slip that would become black glaze.

Next, he thickened his black silhouettes, adding another layer near their edge. His technique employed low-relief lines, and a textural effect of the black. Exekias applied his clay slips for the added colours: a copious amount of white covered the sail, while a purple-red colour articulated other details, such as Dionysus' drinking horn. Afterwards, Exekias drew protective contours around all his figures before painting any remaining spaces with yet another clay slip.

Upon firing, this last slip turned shiny and an intense red – a coral red, unlike the paler pink-red clay background of other scenes in black figure. In so doing, Exekias became the originator of the so-called coral-red technique which soon attracted admiration. At the same time, it enabled him to achieve a range of visual and textural contrasts: thus, for example, the matt appearance of the white sail and

the purple-red drinking horn contrasts with the shine of the black glaze and of the coral red. The result was extravagant and dazzling.

To finish, Exekias cut fine incisions, showing off his sharp vision, dedication to detail, and love for patterns. When you look at the image you can see how big Dionysus is compared to the warship. But Exekias favoured having large figures upon which he could place more minute details. The garment Dionysus is wearing is a good example of this: you can see how Exekias has incised crosses and painted purple-red dots, indicating an elaborate piece of clothing. Equally intricate are the details of his musculing and hair which make Exekias' figures at once more human than any others in black-figure. The whole scene is framed by the lush clusters of grapes, the individual details of which again achieve their precision by incision. With Exekias, we have Attic black-figure reaching its apogee; real innovation in figure-painting after him would have to await the invention of a whole new technique: that of red-figure in approximately 530 B.C.

Pride in technical work

At some point in decorating this cup, Exekias painted an inscription at the vertical side of the cup's foot – a signature which reads 'Exekias made [me]': ΕΞΕΚΙΑΣ ΕΠΟΕΣΕ. On other vases he signs himself as a painter, or sometimes as both potter and painter. Apparently, Exekias was proud to be both, blurring the distinction between potters' and painters' work, between craft and art respectively. Yet, with the Dionysus cup, he produced an unparalleled masterpiece because he knew all too well the properties of raw, wet, and hard-fired clays; his deep understanding enabled him to innovate in terms of both shape and technique, pushing black-figure to its limits and to its best. Exekias was a technical virtuoso and proud of it: in signing himself off as its maker, he communicated this fact to his vase buyers. Exekias had made *this*.

Katerina Volioti specializes in the materiality of Greek vases, on which she has published many articles. She is currently teaching modules on Classical art and archaeology at the University of Roehampton.